

# Classical and postcolonial tragedy: Euripides' and Wole Soyinka's *Bacchae*

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In 1974, the Old Vic in London staged the first production a version of Euripides' *Bacchae*, written by the Nigerian (more accurately, Yoruba) poet and intellectual Wole Soyinka. *The Bacchae of Euripides: a communion rite* retains some of the characters and narrative of Euripides' play, but mostly the original is overlaid with Yoruba and Christian elements, transforming it into something altogether new. Why was it that Soyinka turn to Euripides, a poet from a different continent and several millennia earlier? What is the significance of classical learning in West Africa?

## Imperial weights

The answer could lie in historical developments since antiquity. 'Classics' as a discipline has long been considered a definitive part of British and Western culture, and the Roman Empire has often been seen as a model, or even justification, for western imperialism. Europe and America have seen themselves as the heirs to the civilisation of the Ancient Greeks and Romans: their political systems; their art and architecture; their philosophy, and their literature. It is impossible to conceive of Western philosophy without Plato, architecture without the Parthenon, literature without Homer, Virgil, or Euripides.

This classical vision was imposed on African society, and taught to young Africans in school. For Soyinka and others in post-imperial Africa, Greek texts like the *Bacchae* are inseparably bound up with European imperialism. Many post-imperialist writers have chosen to write in English, either from ideological reasons (such as the desire to reclaim the language taught by former colonial masters), or more practically, to reach a wider audience. A smaller group have chosen to develop or engage with canonical texts: examples would include Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (setting the Homeric story on the Caribbean island of St Lucia), and Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* (a prequel to Brontë's *Jane Eyre*). Rewriting a familiar plot with significant differences can be more effective than creating an 'original' plot, because it invites the reader or audience to ponder from a new perspective the hidden assumptions that underlie the original.

In Soyinka's view, moreover, there is a profound connection between ancient Greece and Yoruba culture: both are oral societies that give a central role to ritual. As in the Athenian festival of Dionysus (where tragedies were performed), so in Yoruba society religious ecstasy is linked to political movements, sacred rites involve the uses of masks (and often flamboyant, elaborate costumes), making use of the symbolic change of identity of the wearer.

## Units of power

The *Bacchae* has been one of the most popular plays of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: it seems to speak to successive generations and different peoples, even when their priorities are very different. Perhaps one of the most obviously relevant to

post-colonialism is that of West against East, 'civilisation' against 'barbarism'. In the play, Dionysus arrives in Thebes from the East, but the spread of his cult is resisted by the tyrant Pentheus. (See Tom Harrison's piece in this issue on tyrants.) The play might be taken to reflect the doomed arrogance of colonialist forces – or, indeed, post-freedom dictators. Soyinka relocates the action to Africa, and there are hints that Dionysus too is of African upbringing. He also shifts the social responsibility from the slaves to the ruling classes, displaying a quasi-socialist desire for equality.

Gender is also a strong theme in Euripides' play. Pentheus is disturbed by the women's behaviour under the influence of the new god, particularly their refusal to stay within the confines of the city (and, by implication, under his control). The play as a whole explores the tension between the tyrant's desire for order and the chaos brought by the new god (who nonetheless exerts his own kind of control over the members of his cult). Pentheus and Dionysus represent two opposed models of power and leadership: the young human king lives in his father's shadow, seeking to impose his will by brute force alone, while Dionysus succeeds in gaining power by inspiring devotion among his followers. The attraction of these themes of power, authority, violence and liberation to post-colonial Africa is clear.

## An area of deprivation

Soyinka presents Thebes as a disintegrated society of Thebes much more explicitly than Euripides does. With the addition of a new-year scapegoat ritual involving symbolic flogging (ironically initiated by the king himself, who will become the victim), the Yoruba play presents a brutal society. Under Pentheus' sacrilegious rule, there is no longer any 'difference between ritual and reality', and the rites no longer have any moral power. The society represented here is thoroughly sick; it desperately needs the cleansing through which the community may be renewed. Soyinka also presents the oppression of the society through his emphasis on slavery: the scapegoat is usually a slave, and the slaves make up the chorus. (In Euripides, the chorus is the 'Bacchae' themselves, the women followers of the god.) In this society, the only way to advance oneself is to have 'the sly humility, the downcast eye' (in the words of the herdsman). Euripides, on the other hand, does not present slavery as an unnatural or unethical situation. Indeed, in the fifth episode of the play, the messenger goes so far as to suggest a sympathetic bond between master and slave: 'good slaves are strongly affected by their masters' affairs'.

The sickness of Soyinka's Thebes springs from its condoning of slavery. Soyinka is concerned to give a voice to the oppressed, and identifies Dionysus with liberation. Clearly, the new emphasis upon the theme of slavery and freedom arises from the post-colonial context.

## Tragic volumes

Soyinka's version not only adapts Euripides' text, but also the genre of tragedy. In reworking the classical Greek tragic pattern so as to integrate Yoruba ritual and cosmology, Soyinka seeks to create a new form, 'Yoruba tragedy'.

Greek tragedy usually results in a disaster, in the form of exceptional suffering as contrasted with the previous happiness or glory enjoyed. The tragedy, according to Aristotle in the *Poetics*, should move the audience to feel pity for some or all of the characters, and fear in view of the limited influence we have over our own destiny. The tragedy may be brought about by factors beyond the subject's power (for example an oracle or curse), her or his own actions and character (for example in the *Medea*), or by the incomprehensible and alienated gods, who 'kill us for their sport' (to quote from the *Bacchae*).

Yoruba society is much less unified than ancient Athenian: it is, rather, a mixture of diverse cultural practices, loosely centred around the Ifa oracle. The individual gods are either deified ancestors or natural forces. Existence is perceived as a series of seamless transitions, and ritual exists to bridge the gaps; it is therefore of paramount importance. These gods are not conceived of as distanced from disillusioned mankind, however, but longing for reconciliation with the mortal sphere.

The greater benevolence of Yoruba gods and the positive, salvational role of ritual, are a key aspect of Soyinka's tragedy. As in Euripides' play, the tragic protagonist confronts hostile forces, which lead to his personal disintegration. At the end of Soyinka's, however, Pentheus (after immense personal suffering, isolated from his environment and society) 'recreates' himself. In the process, he reaches self-knowledge, which profits society by offering it a way of understanding itself. In Soyinka's final scene, Pentheus' head spurting blood becomes symbolic of a Christian communion and redemption (signalled by the subtitle: *a communion rite*) from a non-vengeful god. A strong contrast with Euripides' conception of destructive anger.

In this almost humanist perception of tragedy, the goal, to energise the community, is positive, and thus negates the need for a disastrous ending; death is not the final stage of life, but one more transitional stage, as the ancestors continue to be brought alive by ritual.

For Soyinka and many Yoruba, ritual is the point of meeting between the divine and the human, the sacred and the profane. It is at this moment, apparently, that one may experience 'the tragic', in the gulf that exists between the gods (aiming to be reunited with men), and men (wishing to regain immortality). This point is what Soyinka calls 'the fourth area of experience,': this is 'the home of the tragic', he writes, since it can be considered to 'fill the gaps' between the cycle of living, ancestors, and unborn.

Ogun, Soyinka's particular god and understood by him to be Dionysus' twin brother (both fragmentations from a supreme power, Onise-nla or Zeus), is himself the god of transition. His crossing of the boundary between god and men is what is celebrated in ritualised festivals, from one realm of knowledge into another. Thus Ogun himself comes to symbolize the tragic. In his *Bacchae*, this journey of transition is taken by Pentheus. In Euripides' play, he perhaps recognises his errors at the point of death: 'do not through my errors kill your child'. For Soyinka, however, this becomes the central theme, the whole point of the play.

The question of why Soyinka chose to adapt an existing play, and why he transformed it so extensively, reaches beyond the analysis of the individual play to his vision of art in general. For Soyinka, the ability of plays to change their meanings with their situations is part of their power. He is on record as claiming that his plays should continually be adapted by directors, so that each performance is different, and pertinent to their time. To this end, he incorporates what he calls 'time capsules' of political commentary, as 'instructions for future directors'. Thus, he ensures that his plays are continually relevant as much for their

specific as universal themes. His adaptation of Euripides' *Bacchae* is true to, and relevant for, his own vision, situation, and times. But at a deeper level, we might conclude that the two works display a strikingly shared vision: both playwrights see cruelty and oppression as an inevitable part of the human condition.

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For more on Wole Soyinka, see  
<http://www.nobel.se/literature/laureates/1986/soyinka-bio.html>  
[http://www.literature-awards.com/authors/wole\\_soyinka](http://www.literature-awards.com/authors/wole_soyinka)